

The Shepherd & The Flock • Psalm 23

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Fears In the Night*

1. I was a child of vivid imagination
2. Remember the whole *Man from UNCLE - Get Smart - Wild, Wild West* time?
 - a. well, I lived it - I was a super secret agent
 - b. I had a *Secret Sam Attaché Case* with covert camera, periscope, and breakdown rifle
 - d. I had the 6th finger
 - c. and I even took one of my shoes, cut off the heel, dug out the inside, and put plastic explosive in it - well it was silly putty - but it looked like plastic explosive!
 - d. I was into it!
3. But my imagination always seemed to run strongest at night, right after I had gone to bed
 - a. and far from thoughts of being a secret agent - I was just sure there was some evil sadist under my bed,
 - b. so I would lie on my back, with my hands and feet positioned as far from the edges of the bed as possible, lest one of them become bait for the powerful grip of that hideous ghoul lying in wait below me
4. This was a nightly routine for me
5. Sometimes, when the house would creak and the terror was too great, I would call out for my mother, and she would come into my room to quiet my fears
6. When I was about 7 or 8, she decided it was time for me to conquer my *own* fears; so she taught me something her mother had taught her
7. When she was afraid, she would pray the 23rd Psalm
8. So as she knelt beside my bed, line by line she helped me memorize this precious Psalm
9. From then on, whenever fear got the best of me, I would say the 23rd Psalm, and it would bring me peace

B. *Beloved Psalm*

1. This Psalm is precious to *many*
2. It's one of the most beloved passage in the entire bible - And also, one of the most quoted
3. It's been the source of comfort for millions during times of trial and distress
4. It's a great privilege to be studying it this morning with you
5. May the Holy Spirit make it even more a blessing to us today

II. TEXT

A. *The Psalm*

{1} The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

{2} He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

{3} He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

{4} Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

{5} You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

{6} Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

1. The first thing that strikes us about this Psalm when read all 6 verses is that there are *two* pictures of God presented here
 - a. the first one, and the one most people think of is found in verse 1 = The Lord as *Shepherd*
 - b. but there is another picture found in verses 5 & 6 = It's that of God as a *Generous Host*
2. It was perfectly natural that David, who wrote this, should mix both pictures
 - a. you see, in the ancient Near East, kings often referred to themselves as shepherds,
 - b. and it was expected that they would be a generous host to those who visited their court, hosting a royal banquet for their servants and guests
 - c. David, as king of Israel saw his role as shepherd of the nation and provider for his court
 - d. but he knew that ultimately, he was only an *under*-shepherd
 - e. the *real* Shepherd of Israel was God who was also their Great Provider
3. So, though David was king - He was under an even *greater* King

B. The Lord Is My Shepherd

{1} The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

1. One day in Sunday School, a young boy was quoting Psalm 23 which the class was supposed to have memorized
2. But he got the words a bit mixed and said, "The Lord is my shepherd—what more shall I want?"
 - a. he may have gotten the word order a bit mixed up -
 - b. but he got the meaning exactly right!
3. David had *himself* been a shepherd
 - a. he knew what it meant to lead a flock and attend to their needs
 - b. it was the shepherd's duty to make sure the flock was taken care of
4. Shepherds will be the first to tell you that sheep are *high maintenance* charges - they tend to be rather foolish creatures that can get into a lot of trouble
5. As a result, the task of a shepherd is an arduous one
 - a. his attention to the flock is unceasing
 - b. his care, diligent
6. Phillip Keller, who raised sheep for a living, has written a wonderful book called, *A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23* - I recommend it to you

7. Keller says that "the lot in life of any particular sheep depends on the *type* of man who owns it"
 - a. if he genuinely cares for the flock, the sheep will do well
 - b. but if the shepherd is selfish or lazy, they will suffer
8. David says, "The LORD [Yahweh] is my Shepherd." and because of that - "I shall not want"
9. David likely remembered some of the shepherds he had known as a child
 - a. shepherds who were selfish and lazy
 - b. their sheep were scrawny and sick; they were infested with parasites -
 - c. while David's sheep were well tended, healthy, and at peace
10. David delighted to know that his Shepherd was taking good care of him
11. Jesus applies the picture of the Good Shepherd to Himself in John 10; He said .

{John 10:14} "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.

12. With even *greater* conviction than David, you and I can say, "Jesus is my Shepherd, I shall not want."
13. But do we?
 - a. are we satisfied with the Lord's management of our lives?
 - b. are we content with His provision and care?
14. *Contentment* should be the hallmark of the man or woman who's put their life in the hand of God - "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want."
15. While the lost are seeking here and there, searching high and low for security; we are safe in Christ - "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

{Psa 68:19} Blessed be the Lord, Who daily loads us with benefits.

{Psa 121:4} Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

Say it with me - "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

{2} He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

16. Sheep are such skittish creatures that it's impossible for them to lie down unless 4 conditions are met - and it's the duty of the shepherd to make sure they are
17. First of all, they have to be free of all fear: Sheep are so timid they are panicked by the slightest thing - anything unfamiliar will cause them to bolt - and one frightened sheep can disturb dozens more without the others ever knowing the cause
 - a. but nothing so calms the flock than to see the shepherd standing among them
 - b. they know that he will protect them, that it is his duty to defend them
 - c. as they keep their eyes on him, their fears are stilled
 - d. and so it is with us;
 - 1) anxiety is a tremendous problem today
 - 2) the pace and complications of the modern world have overwhelmed many
 - 3) if we get our eyes off of Christ and on to the tumult around us, then just like Peter on the Sea, we begin to sink into fear

- 4) the remedy to fear is to keep our eyes on Jesus - the Shepherd who has promised to defend and protect us
18. Second, if sheep are to rest, there can be no friction between them
- sheep have a pecking order
 - one sheep will assert its dominance over the others by butting them with the top of its head
 - when there is rivalry among the sheep, tension upsets the entire flock
 - but as soon as the shepherd begins to walk among the sheep, the rivalries end
 - each sheep realizes the shepherd is the undisputed leader and in light of his authority, they are all equals
 - envy and contentions only exist in the Church when we get our eyes off Jesus and begin to guard our own turf - protecting our own little patch of the pasture
19. Third, sheep are subject to all kinds of pests and parasites, but they will only rest if they aren't being bugged by them
- the shepherd knows how to diagnose what pests are bothering his sheep and what remedies to apply
 - he has a whole arsenal of salves and ointments - as well as a knowledge of what plants will provide relief
 - who among us doesn't know what it means to be "bugged" by pesky little troubles?
 - they aren't big major trials - they're just a lot of little things that pester us, like gnats buzzing round our head
 - Jesus knows of these things - and just as a sheep cannot rest when it's pestered, Jesus knows we need relief if we are to rest
 - so He applies the oil of the Holy Spirit to calm us and smooth away the irritation of living in a fallen world
20. Fourth, sheep will not rest if they are hungry
- they must be well fed if they are to lie down
 - now, we might think that finding pasturage is the *easiest* part of the shepherd's task
 - but in fact, it's the *hardest*
 - he had to plan out well in advance where he would take his flock
 - some pastures were seasonal
 - different fields produced different kinds of grass that had different effects on the sheep's health
 - as well, the shepherd had to watch the grazing rate of the flock
 - 1) left too long on the same ground, the sheep would eat the grass right down to the roots
 - 2) this would result in the death of the plants and ruin a good pasture
 - 3) so the shepherd watched closely, and led the flock to new ground before the pasture was ruined
 - a healthy, steady diet meant diligent work on the part of the shepherd
 - in the same way - the Lord knows precisely the *spiritual* diet we need to make us grow,
 - and He leads us through life, taking us to those pastures that are going to

provide us just what we need
21. And as Jesus ministers to each of these needs, we find rest in Him.

He leads me beside the still waters.

22. Sheep are such timid animals, they tend to be spooked by swift running streams - so they will only drink from still water
23. This means the shepherd has to keep careful watch over the flock because sheep will often drink from any old puddle, no matter how dirty or polluted it may be
24. The shepherd is careful to take the flock to those ponds that are fed by clean streams so that the water will be pure and fresh, not stagnant
25. Besides our physical thirst, men and women have thirsty *souls*
 - a. and often, just like sheep, they will stop to slake their thirst at the polluted mud-holes of this world
 - b. but Jesus leads His people to the refreshing wells of truth and life
 - c. He said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come unto me and drink. And out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."
 - d. In John 10 Jesus said, "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."
 - e. the satisfaction that people are seeking is not to be obtained from this world - it can only be found by partaking of Christ!

He leads me beside the still waters.

26. There is another way David may have intended us to understand this that's brought out by Keller
 - a. in the middle east, open water sources are rare
 - b. so one of the ways sheep get their daily water requirement is off the morning dew
 - c. the shepherd will rise a couple hours before dawn and lead the flock out to pasture while the dew is thick on grass - as they feed, they also drink
 - d. it's this early morning grazing that provides the nourishment they need
 27. I think it's no coincidence that we find the repeated reference in scripture to those who rose early in the morning to spend time with the Lord, feasting on the Word and drinking in prayer
 28. As well, a look at those men and women who have been most mightily used of God in history reveals that most of them spent the early hours of each day in prayer
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{3} He restores my soul;

29. While this psalm is mainly the boast of one who was in the Lord's care, that does not mean that life was one long undisturbed joy ride for David
30. He knew what it was to be *discouraged*; he knew what it was to *fall*
31. After all, it is the *Shepherd* who is good - not the sheep!
32. But the Shepherd shows His goodness in that, when the sheep have blown it, He restores them
33. In Psalm 42 David cried,

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God. {11}

- a. David is using an illustration here that was well understood by those who lived in a pastoral setting
 - b. you see, a "cast" sheep is one whose coat has become so heavy, that when it lies down, it rolls over too far and ends up on it's back with it's little feet in the air, pawing away frantically but in futility
 - c. a sheep in this condition is called "cast" - and it will stay that way till someone rolls it back over onto it's feet
 - d. left that way too long, the gases in it's rumen will expand, cutting off circulation and pressing the other organs
 - e. if it's warm, left that way for a few hours, it will die
34. This is why a shepherd is forever counting his sheep - if he comes up short, his first thought is that there is a cast sheep somewhere - and he sets out to find it
35. When he does, he sets it back on it's feet
- a. and because the legs are numb, he will straddle it and rub the legs to get the circulation going again
 - b. all the time he is doing this, he is speaking softly to the sheep to calm it from it's panic
 - c. the Shepherd's voice is the single most calming thing in a sheep's life
36. All of this is conveyed in the phrase, "***He restores my soul.***"
37. Many people have the idea that when they fall or are frustrated and discouraged that God becomes disgusted, fed-up and even angry with them
- a. they think that God is only happy with those who smile, are on top of the world, and who never blow it
 - b. this is simply not so
 - c. remember the parable Jesus told of the lost sheep?
 - 1) a shepherd had 100 sheep - one got lost
 - 2) he left the 99 to go in search of the one
 - 3) and when he found it, what did he do? Beat it - slap it around for getting lost?
 - 4) no - he rejoiced and called the other shepherds together to celebrate!
- [Luke 15]
38. Have you erred - have you strayed? The Good Shepherd is here today to restore your soul!
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He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

39. Sheep require more care than any other livestock because they are terrible creatures of habit
40. If not properly led, they will cover the same ground, on the same trails, until they have turned rich green fields into barren wastes
41. You may have heard stories of how in the settling of the West, cattle ranchers absolutely *hated* sheep ranchers
 - a. the reason why was because while cattle would only graze to a certain point then move on - sheep would ruin a pasture
 - b. they would foul the watering holes and infest them with all kinds of refuse and parasites

42. There were *range wars* between cattle and sheep ranchers because sheep are so, well, stupid!
 43. I think it's no coincidence that in Scripture, people are likened to sheep; what sheep are *naturally*, people are *spiritually*
 44. Left to ourselves, we will sit in one place until we are fat and sassy, and have turned our surroundings into a barren spiritual wasteland
 45. But the Good Shepherd won't let us get too fat and sassy - He moves us on, taking us deeper in the things of the Spirit - teaching us to overcome the flesh and walk in the Spirit
 46. Sheep need exercise if they are to be healthy - and so do Christians if they are to be *spiritually* healthy
 47. So the Lord leads us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake
 48. May I say that if it seems like you have been doing more following of Jesus in the paths of righteousness than lying in green pastures as of late - it may be because He is returning soon, and while previous generations of believers had more space between their trials, Jesus is shortening the rest stops for us because we are in a kind of spiritual *cram* session for His return
 49. From most everyone I speak to, this seems to be the case - it is certainly my experience
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{4} Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me;

50. As the shepherd would take the flock from pasture to pasture, there would be some territory they would pass through that was more dangerous than others
 - a. predators were more numerous
 - b. there were cliffs and holes that might present trouble to unwary sheep
 51. But the sheep's safety always lay in staying close to the shepherd
 52. Christian - this is a dangerous world, full of predators and traps
 53. Your safety is directly proportional to how close you are to Jesus
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Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

54. The shepherd's rod was a club used to drive away predators
 - a. a young shepherd in training would always be on the lookout for a suitable piece of wood to use as their rod
 - b. this would then be their constant companion for the rest of their life
 - c. they would practice swinging it - and throwing it
 - d. they would become so skilled with it that they could hit almost anything at great distances
55. The staff was a long, slender, sturdy shaft the shepherd used to guide the sheep
 - a. when traversing a path along a cliff, the staff was used like a fence to keep the sheep away from the edge
 - b. when the shepherd wanted the flock to turn a certain way, he would tap the side of the sheep and nudged them
56. The rod speaks of *protection*, the staff of *guidance*
57. When the flock sees the rod and the staff together in the shepherd's hand, they know they are safe and secure
58. For the believer, the rod and staff of the Lord are His Word

- a. Ephesians 6 tells us the sword of the Spirit is the word of God
- b. and in Psalm 119 we read . . .

{105} Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

C. The LORD As Generous Host

1. In verses 5 & 6, David shifts the picture from God as Shepherd to Generous Host

{5} You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

2. It was the responsibility of a middle eastern monarch to provide for the members of his court and his guests
3. The royal, oriental banquet was a sumptuous affair -a lavish display of wealth
4. David sees himself as a member of God's court and so, privileged to live in His palace and eat at His table
5. When he says,

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

- a. it's a parallel to what we read in v. 2 - that he lies down in green pastures
 - b. David's peace in God is so great, that even though he lives in the midst of those who would like nothing more than to kill him, he can sit down and eat a good meal without concern
 - c. have you ever tried eating when the tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife?
 - d. let's face it, it's really hard to have an appetite when there is anger and animosity in the room
 - e. but because of God's gracious provision, David was at peace, even in the midst of his enemies!
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You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

6. When a guest would enter a home, the good host would take a flask of perfumed oil, unstop it, and pour a liberal dose onto the guests head
 - a. they did not take showers in the ancient world, and baths were rare
 - b. this was their manner of refreshing one another
 - c. the sweet smell of the perfume would mask the less than pleasant natural odors of the person
 - d. the idea here parallels the Lord *restoring our soul* - He pours the sweet oil of joy onto the stinky problems and smelly attitudes we can develop by just living daily life in a fallen world
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My cup runs over.

7. Being the generous host He is, God *heaps* His blessings on those who come to Him
 - a. at His table, He doesn't measure out His wine with an eye dropper
 - b. He gushes buckets of the stuff
 - c. David's cup runs over!

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Your Perception*

1. Is your God a *stingy miser* Who has to be coerced and cajoled into parting with a blessing
2. Or is He David's *Generous Host* who delights in measuring out His gifts in such lavish measure that they overwhelm our capacity to receive them?
3. Friend, your *perception* of God will determine your *expectation* of God
4. And your expectation of God will largely determine what you *receive*
5. So listen - God wants to show Himself as the Good Shepherd and The Generous Host to you
6. Expect great things from the Lord - because He is GREAT
7. David had a cup that God overflowed: If you don't even have a cup to be filled, just your open hand, then ask Him to *give* you a cup
 - a. if you have a cup, ask Him to exchange it for a bowl
 - b. if you have a bowl, ask for a tub
 - c. if you have a tub, ask for a pool
 - d. if your have a pool, ask for a lake
 - e. if you have a lake, ask for an ocean
 - f. no matter what your container - no matter how big your faith or your expectation of God - He wants to *overflow* it!

B. *David Ends*

{6} Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

1. David was convinced of God's grace
2. The Lord wants YOU to be too!